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The Buddha's Training for Freedom — Abridged Edition

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1. Ven. Sāriputta's Answer

In the Pali Canon, a group of monks preparing to travel to a remote, Dhamma-ignorant part of India stop to ask Ven. Sāriputta — the Buddha's foremost disciple in discernment — how they should answer if asked, "What does your teacher teach?" (SN 22:2). Rather than reaching for famous terms like emptiness or nirvāṇa, Sāriputta offers a simple formula: "Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion." He predicts that wise foreigners will follow up by asking,

“desire and passion for what?” — and answers: for the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness) from which we construct our sense of self. This is a radical demand, since these are exactly the things we’re most attached to.

Why start here? Because, Sāriputta explains, anything built from these aggregates will inevitably change for the worse — and if you haven’t abandoned passion for it, that change brings pain. Abandon the passion, and the change no longer hurts. This reveals the Buddha’s motive as compassion: a practical path away from self-inflicted suffering, and toward genuine, long-term happiness — since skillful qualities (renunciation, goodwill, compassion) bring peace now and well-being later, while unskillful ones (greed, aversion, delusion) bring turmoil now and suffering later.

This short exchange raises five questions that the rest of the book will pursue: 1. The Dhamma is fundamentally psychological — the mind, not the world, is “forerunner” of experience (Dhp 1). How does the mind create suffering, and how can it stop? 2. The mind has real power of choice — it isn’t imprisoned by its past. How does it learn to redirect itself skillfully? 3. The teaching is a course of action, a how-to, not a worldview — and the mind resists retraining. What form does that training take? 4. The training rests on a value judgment: actions should be judged by their long-term results, including across lifetimes. What grounds this standard, and how objective is it? 5. Paradoxically, a teaching that ends desire and passion still promises desirable results — freedom from suffering, lasting happiness. Is this inconsistency, or strategy?

To answer these, the book first looks at the philosophical landscape the Buddha was responding to — because his listeners, ancient and modern, will judge his teaching by contrast with its rivals.

2. An Affirmation of Power

The Buddha taught among rival schools, roughly divided into the brahmans (upholding the Vedas) and the samaṇas ("those in tune" — contemplatives who rejected Vedic authority and sought truth through observation, reason, or practice). The Buddha identified himself as a samaṇa.

What unites almost all the rival teachings of the era, contrary to popular belief, is a doctrine of powerlessness. Brahmans taught that non-brahmans were powerless to perform the rites needed for well-being and had to pay brahmans to do it for them. Among the samaṇas, two flavors of powerlessness predominated: (1) the mind's powerlessness to know which actions are skillful — the Buddha mocked these "eel-wrigglers" for refusing to give students any grounds for choosing right action; and (2) the powerlessness of action itself to shape outcomes — via strict determinism (physical law or a controlling god determines everything), via a doctrine that past action shapes the present but present action can't affect present experience, or via pure indeterminism (nothing is caused, so grab pleasure while you can). In every case, good and evil become mere convention, and people are freed from responsibility — a conveniently comfortable position, but one that leaves them without real guidance, without power to avoid suffering, and without meaning in their own choices.

Against this backdrop, Sāriputta's opening move — starting not with a picture of the world but with a course of mental action leading to happiness — is a pointed assertion of the power of the mind. It tells sophisticated listeners: you have, within your own mind, the power not to suffer, and reliable guidance for developing it. Because action has real power, training becomes possible; the teaching is a call to skillful action, not just a doctrine to contemplate. This is why the topic of kamma (action) is the natural starting point for exploring what makes the Buddha's teaching distinctive.

3. Proactive People with Proactive Minds

The early discourses show the Buddha engaging listeners — kings, laborers, lepers, outcastes — as agents already pursuing happiness, however confusedly, and taking their questions seriously rather than reciting canned doctrine (contrast: DN 2, where rival teachers answer a king's question about the fruits of contemplative life with irrelevant sermons, "like asking about a mango and getting an answer about a jackfruit"). The Buddha's compassion responded to real suffering in real people; he never treated followers as illusions to be argued out of existence, nor as passive vessels. Teaching people to view their own minds in more impersonal terms was simply a strategy to give them enough distance from cherished, confused desires to replace them with better ones.

This proactive view of mind underlies the Buddhist doctrine of kamma. Of the three kinds of action — bodily, verbal, mental — intention is what determines results in all three. Unskillful intentions (rooted in greed, aversion, delusion) tend toward unpleasant results; skillful intentions (free of these roots) tend

toward pleasant ones — even though short-term outcomes can run the other way (the honest are sometimes punished; the corrupt sometimes rewarded). Good intentions alone don't guarantee good outcomes, since they can be mixed with delusion — but skillful intentions, by definition free of delusion, don't carry that risk.

Crucially, our six senses are themselves the fruit of old kamma (SN 35:145) — but that doesn't mean old kamma dictates what we do next. If it did, "should" and "should not" would be meaningless, and no path to the end of suffering could exist. The mind as recipient of sense data is shaped by the past; the mind as agent, choosing what to do right now, is free to act skillfully regardless of what's arriving through the senses. This is how the Buddha steers between total determinism and total chaos: causal relationships exist, and within them there's real freedom to master causality and direct events toward genuine well-being.

4. Intimate Causality

Moving from personal to impersonal terms, the Buddha describes causality with a formula called this/that conditionality:

> "When this is, that is. From the arising of this, comes the arising of that. When this isn't, that isn't. From the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that." (Ud 1:3)

This compact formula actually combines two principles. The first pair ("when this is, that is… when this isn't, that isn't") describes simultaneous causality — cause and effect arise and vanish together, like a finger burning the instant it enters a flame and the pain stopping the instant it's withdrawn. The second pair

("from the arising of this comes the arising of that…") describes causality across time — a burn mark that lingers and heals slowly after the finger is pulled out, or a planted seed that becomes a long-lived tree, which nevertheless, being impermanent, eventually dies.

Both principles operate together, so at any moment you experience some mix of: results of past actions (near and distant), present actions, and some results of those present actions already ripening. Nothing here points to distant, abstract causes — everything is "this" and "that," immediately present and knowable in direct experience, however easily overlooked.

Because minds are aware of the immediate results of their own actions, this allows for fast feedback loops: touch fire, feel pain, withdraw. But such loops often misfire. We may be too insensitive to notice a cause-effect link; results carry no label announcing which action (recent, distant, or present) produced them, and many feedback loops run simultaneously, producing confusion about what's causing what (the Canon describes ascetics who mistake pain from self-imposed austerities for old kamma burning off — MN 101); wrong views can blind us to present-moment causation entirely; and some unskillful actions yield pleasant results in the moment, desensitizing us to the discomfort of the unskillful mind-state itself. Every action aims at happiness, yet because we can misjudge our most intimate causal relationships, we routinely cause suffering for ourselves and others.

5. Fueled by Intention

The Buddha's detailed working-out of this/that conditionality is dependent co-arising: a causal sequence, in several canonical variants, running from ignorance to suffering. It operates across timescales from lifetimes to the blink of an eye, and you don't need to master an entire chain — bringing knowledge to any one causal link (what it is, its cause, its cessation, the path to its cessation) severs the whole sequence.

The standard list (SN 12:2) runs: ignorance → fabrications → consciousness at the six senses → name-and-form → the six sense media → contact → feeling, and onward toward suffering. Notably, several factors of *present* kamma — fabrications, and name-and-form — precede the six sense media, which are the fruit of *old* kamma. In other words, we bring preconceptions, intentions, and constructed meaning to a situation even before we encounter it through the senses — which is why present-moment kamma, done with knowledge, can redirect the effects of even very bad old kamma, and why ignorant present kamma can spoil the fruits of good old kamma.

Intention shows up at two points before sense contact. Within "name-and-form," it clusters with feeling (pleasure/pain/neutral), perception (the mental labels that identify what something is, means, and is worth), attention (choosing what to notice and what to ignore), and contact (interaction among these mental events) — a cluster fast enough to produce split-second feedback loops. A flash of anger produces an intention to say something hurtful; that intention itself produces a twinge of pain; if you notice the pain and correctly perceive its cause,

you can abandon the harmful intention before acting. But if attention is poor or the pain gets misattributed (blamed on the other person, say), the unskillful intention compounds instead.

Earlier still, intention appears as fabrication — "putting together" — the mind's creative, purposeful activity, occurring on both a macro scale (bodily/verbal/mental actions shaping future rebirth) and a micro scale directly observable in meditation: bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath; verbal fabrication is inner speech (directed thought plus evaluation); mental fabrication is feeling and perception. The macro depends on the micro — you couldn't act, speak, or think without breath, self-talk, and feeling/perception first. This is why meditating on these micro-fabrications addresses kamma at its very root. It also means the five aggregates Sāriputta names as objects for desire and passion aren't just things we crave — our craving to fabricate them is part of what brings them into being moment to moment. The present is, in this sense, a perpetual construction site: as long as the intentions doing the constructing are shaped by ignorance, what gets built will eventually collapse and cause suffering. But present-moment skill can turn even poor "ingredients" from the past into a wholesome result — which is exactly where the Buddha directs sustained training.

6. Ignorance

Oddly, "desire" and "passion" appear nowhere in the standard list of dependent co-arising — yet the Buddha elsewhere states that all phenomena are rooted in desire, with the sole exception of unbinding (nibbāna) itself (AN 10:58). The

resolution: desire and passion are implicit throughout the list, starting with the specific ignorance at its head — ignorance of the four noble truths.

1) Suffering (dukkha): beyond the familiar list (birth, aging, death, sorrow, not getting what you want), the Buddha locates the common root in the five clinging-aggregates — form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness (the same five Sāriputta named). They're called "clinging-aggregates" because they're the objects, not the agents, of clinging. Clinging itself takes four forms: sensuality (fantasizing about sense pleasures), views, habits and practices (insisting on a way of doing things regardless of effectiveness), and doctrines of self (identifying with, as owner of, as existing within, or as containing the aggregates — SN 22:1). The aggregates themselves can be pleasant or painful; clinging to them in any of these four ways is what constitutes suffering.

2) The cause of suffering: craving that leads to becoming — taking on an identity within a world of experience centered on a desired object (imagining an ice cream cone conjures both the object and a whole surrounding "world," with yourself as the agent who will obtain it). Becomings can occur on the level of sensuality, form, or formlessness, and on macro (rebirth into a physical world) or micro (momentary mental worlds) scales — the macro arising from the micro, which is part of why a moment of mind at death can shape an entire new existence. Three cravings drive this: for sensuality, for becoming, and — the Buddha's more counterintuitive insight — for non-becoming, the wish that a given identity or world be destroyed, which is itself still a form of taking on identity (MN 49).

3) The cessation of suffering is the abandoning, through dispassion, of all three cravings.

4) The path to cessation is the noble eightfold path — right view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, concentration — organized into the triple training of heightened virtue, heightened mind, and heightened discernment. The eightfold path is ordered by when you take up each factor; the triple training is ordered by when each is mastered: virtue first (sharpening honesty about your own intentions), then concentration (hands-on practice steadying and observing desire), then discernment (seeing desire and passion clearly enough to develop real dispassion). The three trainings are mutually reinforcing rather than strictly sequential — as the Canon puts it, one hand washes the other (DN 4).

Three further points matter here. First, the path's factors are all "how-to," including the doctrinal content of right view — the Buddha doesn't separate theory from practice. Second, the path deliberately makes skillful use of three of the four kinds of clinging (to skillful views, skillful habits, and a skillful sense of self as capable agent, beneficiary, and inner critic of the practice — AN 4:159, AN 3:40, AN 6:20), substituting the pleasure of concentration for the clinging to sensuality it asks you to give up. This is desire and passion used strategically, like a raft built to cross a river and then set down, not carried on your head, once you've reached the far shore (MN 22).

The four truths are called noble both because they concern a goal beyond aging, illness, death, and defilement, and because they're simply, invariably true.

Ignorance of them — whether through not having heard them, or through having heard but not mastered them as applied skills — is what drives suffering. The rest of the book explores how to take up the corresponding duties: to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path — with particular attention to the role desire and passion play both as targets to subdue and as tools for subduing them.

7. The Causes of Ignorance

Ignorance has no traceable beginning (AN 10:61), but its present sustaining causes can be seen directly. Two canonical lists identify them. The five hindrances — sensual desire, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt — obstruct clear seeing; sensual desire (passion for sensual planning and fantasy) and ill will (wanting someone, including yourself, to suffer) are the strongest and most obviously rooted in desire and passion. When these hindrances dominate, the mind loses interest in recognizing its own self-caused suffering, distracted by other agendas.

More deeply, the three effluents — sensuality, becoming, and ignorance — keep the mind "intoxicated" (āsava literally means "flowing out," as in fermented wine). Where the hindrances merely block concentration and can be suppressed at preliminary stages of awakening, the effluents are eradicated only by full awakening; they are the motor forces that keep dependent co-arising running through repeated rebirths. Ignorance and the effluents sustain each other in a feedback loop — "darkness leading to darkness" — until suffering becomes acute enough to make someone seek light. Desire and passion, then, appear even

before ignorance in the causal sequence: they underlie the whole process leading to suffering, which is why subduing them is equated with the freedom of release.

8. Craving & Clinging

The second point where desire and passion operate is right after sensory contact, in the sequence feeling → craving → clinging → becoming → birth → aging-and-death. Craving is technically the cause of suffering (second noble truth); the clinging-aggregates constitute suffering itself (first noble truth) — suggesting a clean split between craving (to be abandoned) and clinging (to be comprehended). But the Buddha elsewhere equates desire and passion with craving, and elsewhere with clinging, blurring that line.

The resolution lies in the words themselves: craving (taṇhā) also means thirst; clinging (upādāna) also means taking sustenance, as a fire takes fuel. Craving is the hunger; clinging is the ongoing act of feeding that hunger still drives. Even once you've found food and started eating, the hunger that got you there is still present, sustaining the eating. Correspondingly, the Buddha never says to abandon the aggregates themselves — only the desire and passion for them (SN 22:139, 142, 145). Craving and clinging are thus two phases of the same desire and passion Sāriputta identified as the heart of the teaching — which is why his two formulations of the goal (subduing desire and passion for the aggregates, in MN 28; abandoning the three cravings, in MN 141) don't actually conflict.

9. Desire & Passion Engendering Conflict

A third, less standard sequence (DN 15) makes desire and passion's role explicit and adds a social dimension: craving depends on feeling; seeking depends on

craving; acquisition on seeking; ascertainment on acquisition; desire and passion on ascertainment; attachment on desire and passion; possessiveness on attachment; stinginess on possessiveness; defensiveness on stinginess; and from defensiveness come violence, quarrels, accusations, divisive speech, and lies.

Picture searching for food: hunger drives the search; you find something, confirm it's edible, and feel desire and passion for it as you begin eating; you grow attached, possessive (like a stray dog guarding its food), refuse to share, grow defensive, and ultimately fight to keep it. Here desire and passion sit between confirming what you've found and becoming attached to it — equivalent, again, to clinging.

This is an impersonal analysis of a drawback the Buddha saw throughout sensuality: it leads inevitably to conflict, personal and international (MN 13). Since beings are defined by their attachments (SN 23:2), and all beings are sustained by "food" in a broad sense (Khp 4), as long as we identify as beings located in a particular world, we remain implicated in conflict with other beings in that world. The only genuine way out is to stop identifying as a being at all — a prospect that can feel frightening if you assume that being a self is the only route to happiness.

10. Implications

Desire and passion play a double role toward the aggregates: as craving/clinging, they feed on aggregates already produced; but as the drivers of fabrication, name-and-form, and consciousness earlier in the sequence, they also *produce* the aggregates to be fed on. We're not just hunter-gatherers of experience but

farmers and manufacturers of it. The Canon's house-building simile makes the point vividly: going from one life to the next is like moving from house to house — but it's our own desire and passion that build each house (Dhp 153–154); wherever craving for more aggregates operates, that's where identity settles. Abandon the desire and passion, and production stops (SN 22:25) — not just peaceful occupancy of the house, but an end to house-building altogether, arriving at a freedom the Buddha calls "the Secure" (SN 43), which needs no house at all.

This rules out two common misreadings. First, that subduing desire and passion just means *accepting* things as they are: mere acceptance represses hunger rather than ending it, and repressed hunger resurfaces elsewhere, however disreputable the source. Since the Buddha promises genuine long-term happiness, the hunger itself must be fully resolved, not merely tolerated. Second, that the practice is a return to some "original," undefiled nature: since ignorance has no discoverable starting point (SN 22:99), and our entire sense of self and world is fabricated by desire, passion, and ignorance together, there is no prior, unfabricated self to return to — nor any need for one. The happiness the Buddha promises is realized *through* a series of skillful mental actions (the third noble truth), but unbinding itself lies beyond all action: once realized, nothing further needs to be done, because suffering has ended for good.

11. The Place of Dispassion

Two similes anchor the Buddha's account of how the end of suffering unfolds: feeding and house-building. In the feeding simile, contemplating the aggregates

leads to disenchantment (nibbidā — literally "having had enough," not aversion but simple loss of appetite), which leads to dispassion, then release (SN 22:59). Disenchantment has an object (you're disenchanted *with* the aggregates); dispassion, notably, does not — it has to extend even to dispassion itself and to the deathless, or awakening remains partial. This is why there are stages of awakening: the first three still carry subtle passion for the taste of dispassion and the deathless; only full awakening is dispassionate toward dispassion itself.

In the house-building simile, two canonical images stand out. The Buddha's own awakening-verses declare the "house-builder" (craving) seen at last, its rafters broken, its ridge-pole dismantled (Dhp 153–154) — dismantling being the act of examining the aggregates until you see they're unworthy of passion, so you build no further houses. And in a homelier image (SN 23:2), the Buddha compares the aggregates to children's sandcastles: as long as passion for them remains, children treasure and defend them; once passion fades, they smash the castles themselves. Ending craving for the aggregates means dismantling them, not merely tolerating them. Dispassion is regularly followed, in the texts, by cessation — because passion is what fueled the fabrication of becomings and identities to begin with; remove it, and the fabricating stops (SN 12:67).

12. Aspects of Dispassion

One passage (AN 4:34) uses "dispassion" as an umbrella term for the whole cluster of qualities marking the end of suffering: the subduing of intoxication, the elimination of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the breaking of the round, the

destruction of craving, cessation, and the realization of unbinding. Worth unpacking:

- **Dispassion as unfabricated yet supreme dhamma**: paradoxically, since fabrication requires intention, and intending fabrications *to stop* would itself be a fabrication, cessation can only happen when the mind holds no intention whatsoever, neither to fabricate nor not to. The Buddha described crossing the stream to awakening as neither pushing forward nor staying in place (SN 1:1) — outside the ordinary binary of action.
- **Sobering of intoxication**: intoxication with youth, health, and life breeds heedlessness (AN 3:39, AN 5:57); dispassion removes it, which is why even the first taste of awakening is said to perfect one's virtue (AN 3:87) — awakening never puts a person above ethics.
- **Uprooting of attachment** (ālaya, also "home"): the mind stops building future "homes" (lives) and feels no nostalgia for past ones.
- **Breaking of the round**: ending the internal process of becoming ends the external round of rebirth (Dhp 153–154).
- **Destruction of craving**: not one act of craving but all craving.
- **Dispassion** (virāga, literally "fading of color"): not fading into darkness (there is none in the deathless — Ud 1:10) but fading into pure light, as an overexposed photograph.
- **Cessation**: without present passion, fabrications have nothing to sustain them. Since past kamma isn't erased by awakening, an awakened person may still experience the senses working out old kamma — but "disjoined" from them (MN 140), no longer feeding.

- **Realization of unbinding** (nibbāna, "extinguishing" a fire): the Buddha's account of fire physics holds that fire, when provoked, clings to (upādāna — the same word as "clinging" in the first noble truth) its fuel; when it lets go, it's released, calm. Unlike an ordinary fire, which can be re-provoked, the mind's release is unprovoked and therefore has no further cause to end. Just as an extinguished fire can't be said to have gone in any direction, an awakened person can't be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither (MN 72) — because beings are defined by their attachments (SN 22:36), and where there are none left, definition fails. This isn't annihilation but a release from all limitation — likened to the immeasurable ocean (MN 72).

13. Possible, Desirable, Objectively True

Since unbinding can't be fully described, the Buddha still had to persuade listeners it was possible, desirable, and true, so they would be motivated to follow the path — even though actual proof would come only from walking the path itself (MN 27).

Possible: The Buddha's account of causality (this/that conditionality) shows neither total determinism nor total chaos, but a pattern within which real freedom operates. Fabricated causes can't produce the unfabricated directly, but they can lead to a threshold where opposing intentions cancel out and fabrications fall away — hence the image of a path, which doesn't cause its destination but leads there. Two features of mind make this workable here and now: its capacity to change direction with unmatched speed, and its luminosity

(AN 1:53) — not an inherent purity, but the capacity to observe its own actions and results and, through commitment and reflection (AN 10:73), adjust course.

The Buddha offered an analogy of proof: a skilled elephant hunter doesn't assume large footprints or high slash-marks belong to the bull elephant he seeks — they might belong to other elephants — but follows them because they're promising, confirming only when he actually sees the bull. Likewise, hearing the Dhamma, meditating, even gaining supernormal knowledge are only footprints and slash-marks; only the first taste of awakening confirms the path is right, and only full awakening completes the search (MN 27).

Objectively true: unbinding isn't known through the six senses, which are themselves colored by past kamma, desire, and passion, and so can't ground fully objective knowledge. Only a knowledge entirely free of conditioning — full awakening — qualifies as objective, which is why the Buddha called unbinding the highest noble truth (MN 140) and used a special verb, "directly knows" (abhijānāti), for this kind of unmediated knowing.

Desirable: mostly conveyed through simile. In one striking passage (SN 56:35), the Buddha says that if offered a hypothetical bargain — 300 spear-stabs daily for a hundred years, in exchange for a guaranteed first glimpse of the four noble truths — a person seeking their own benefit should take the deal, since that glimpse of awakening would come with pleasure, not pain, given how inconceivably long the round of rebirth has already inflicted such suffering without any such reward. If a mere glimpse is worth that much, full and total unbinding is worth incomparably more.

14. The Names of Unbinding

The Buddha gave unbinding at least 33 names (SN 43), falling into three linguistic types — negations of limitation (unborn, unmade, deathless), positive qualities (truth, permanence, the ultimate), and metaphors (harbor, shelter, refuge) — and describing five overlapping aspects:

1. **A form of consciousness** — "unrestricted," "without surface," "unestablished," making contact with no object at all, not even itself (MN 49; Ud 8:1), likened to a beam of light landing on no surface to reflect it (SN 12:64), existing outside space and time altogether, with no coming, going, or staying (Ud 1:10). This isn't blankness — awakened people are said to know and see more fully than ever, to the point of no longer needing conviction (SN 48:44).

2. **Truth** — being unfabricated, it can never change: no arising, passing, or alteration is discernible in it (AN 3:48). Hence "ageless," "undeceptive," "permanence." It also carries a moral dimension as purity, and — as a *state* rather than a *being* — the Canon affirms it unequivocally exists (Ud 8:1, 8:3).

3. **Ultimate bliss (sukha)** — pleasurable, but categorically apart from ordinary feeling (SN 36:19); needing no nutriment, its bliss lacks nothing, so the awakened are "hunger-free" and, being independent of the six senses, unaffected even by death (MN 49).

4. **Total freedom** — though pleasant, it isn't clung to; the awakened are "beyond pleasure and pain" (Ud 1:10), free of fabrication and of the fires of passion, aversion, delusion — even free of passion for dispassion itself. Because "place" arises from craving, and unbinding is free of craving, it isn't a location at all; the awakened are "everywhere released" (Dhp 348). Ven. Sāriputta illustrates the mechanism with a simile: two oxen yoked together aren't each other's fetter — the yoke is the fetter. Likewise the eye isn't the fetter of forms, nor forms of the eye — desire and passion arising in dependence on the two is the fetter. The Buddha sees, hears, and knows through all six senses, but without desire or passion, and so is "well-released in mind" (SN 35:191).

5. **Excellence** — surpassing everything else there is: "the amazing," "the astounding," "the beyond."

15. Desires & Determination on the Path

When a brahman asked Ven. Ānanda about the goal of practice — abandoning desire — and objected that you can't abandon desire by means of desire, Ānanda offered an analogy: didn't the brahman's own desire to visit the park lead him to walk there, and wasn't that desire allayed on arrival? In the same way, the desire and effort that bring you to awakening are allayed once awakening is reached (SN 51:15). You need desire to enter the path; you need it throughout, in the form of right effort and right concentration; and you finally overcome it not by suppression but by satisfying it through the practice.

Desire appears explicitly in two path factors. Right resolve is the determination to abandon resolves for sensual passion, ill will, and harmfulness, replacing them with renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness — the active side of discernment, addressing directly the two strongest hindrances. Right effort is the generation of desire, persistence, and intent to prevent unarisen unskillful qualities, abandon arisen ones, give rise to skillful ones, and develop them to culmination — and this effort, the Buddha notes, actually circles around every factor of the path (MN 117), including virtue.

Crucially, one overarching skillful desire — the desire for awakening — is used to arbitrate among all your other desires, which inevitably creates internal conflict; training is impossible without it. This ordering principle is called determination (adhiṭṭhāna), and the Buddha describes it (MN 140) as fourfold, converging in unbinding: determination on discernment (culminating in the knowledge of the ending of the effluents), on truth (unbinding as the undeceptive, highest truth), on relinquishment (letting go of the mental baggage of possessiveness), and on calm (the abandoning of passion, aversion, delusion). Reaching unbinding is thus the point where every one of your overriding desires is fully, finally satisfied — and so allayed.

16. Honest & Observant

You build the four determinations by using your current level of discernment, truthfulness, relinquishment, and calm to overcome contrary desires — like exercising a muscle. Each is tied to a practice-verb: not neglecting discernment, guarding the truth, being committed to relinquishment, training for calm.

Not neglecting discernment means constantly asking what's skillful and unskillful, and above all, what leads to long-term harm versus long-term well-being (MN 135) — always weighing the future, not just the present, against the temptation of instant gratification (a point reinforced by teachings on mindfulness of death: since death could come at any time, master what you'll need now — MN 131). *Guarding the truth* means basing your views only on direct personal experience, made reliable by becoming a reliable person yourself (MN 95, 110) — truth as both intellectual honesty and personal integrity. *Commitment to relinquishment* means finding joy in letting go of what weighs the mind down. *Training for calm* means removing whatever disturbs the mind, first disturbances that would pull you off the path, later disturbances within the path itself.

This runs directly against ordinary habits: chasing quick results, using deceit, accumulating, and seeking happiness in novelty for its own sake — "going against the stream" (AN 4:5), against desires that have run the mind for countless lifetimes and are cunning enough to co-opt Dhamma language in their own defense (e.g., urging premature "acceptance"). The Buddha didn't shy from calling this a battle, using martial similes: mindfulness as gatekeeper, persistence as soldier, Dhamma-learning as weaponry defending a frontier fortress (AN 7:63); the monk who flees temptation compared to the warrior who wins hand-to-hand combat (AN 5:75).

Training comes from without — teachers who instruct, "rouse, urge, and encourage" — and from within, since only you can fight the battle inside your own mind, requiring constant honest self-observation. Both rest on rudimentary discernment and truthfulness: being observant and honest, both toward your

teachers and toward yourself. This is why the Buddha would only take on students who showed themselves honest and observant.

17. Starting Out Right

The Buddha's training of his own son Rāhula (MN 61) makes the pattern concrete. First, truthfulness: using a near-empty dipper of water as a visual lesson — "that's how little of the contemplative life remains in one who lies without shame" — he has Rāhula commit: "I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest." Then, observation: reflect on any bodily, verbal, or mental action *before* doing it (would it harm myself or others?), *during* it (is it harming now?), and *after* it (did it cause harm?). If harm is found beforehand, don't act; if during, stop; if after, confess it to a more advanced practitioner (for bodily/verbal acts) or develop healthy shame (for mental acts), and resolve restraint going forward. If no harm is found, take joy and continue.

This introduces Rāhula to appropriate attention (asking the right questions about skillful and unskillful action), to admirable friendship (external support, honestly reported to), and to virtue in its two forms — specific rules (like the vow against lying) and character qualities (healthy shame, distinct from either false pride or shamelessness; heedfulness; compassion; integrity — note how often "I" appears in the instructions, teaching Rāhula to own his agency). It also builds all four determinations at once: truthfulness in admitting mistakes, relinquishment of contrary desires, calm arising from the joy of a virtuous life (not forced equanimity but genuine inner satisfaction), and discernment through the ongoing cycle of commitment and reflection — committing to skillful action,

reflecting on motive, action, and result, adjusting, and repeating: "success by approximation," the basic pattern underlying the entire triple training. Rules alert you to unskillful desires hiding behind plausible-sounding principles (like "compassion" invoked to excuse unskillful behavior); character qualities cover the territory rules can't reach. Together, they make the training in virtue thorough and complete.

18. Virtue in Rules

The fullest picture of Buddhist virtue comes through the training the Buddha gave to monks — not a superfluous aesthetic option ("robes and chanting"), but a design for running the path unencumbered, like training for a marathon without extra weight (compare the images of household life as a dusty, confining path versus the open air of the monastic life — MN 36; the householder as a slow-flying peacock versus the monk as a fast wild goose — Sn 1:12). Even those who can't follow this ideal benefit from knowing what it is, to see clearly where their own compromises lie.

The Buddha's teaching is formally called "Dhamma-Vinaya" — Vinaya meaning discipline, related to "subduing." Its core, the Pāṭimokkha (recited fortnightly), plus 22 further chapters of communal rules, cover everything from murder and theft down to bathroom etiquette. Penalties range from permanent expulsion, through periods of penance, to simple confession for most offenses. The rules matter because the battle for awakening isn't fought against desire-in-the-abstract but against specific unskillful desires, large and small — and small, undetected desires tend to grow. Following rules also builds mindfulness,

alertness, and ardency (useful directly in meditation) and pragmatic discernment — since talking yourself into (or out of) a course of action for the sake of long-term benefit is itself a measure of discernment (AN 4:115).

Each Pāṭimokkha rule comes with an origin story — an account of the misbehaving monk (sometimes serious, sometimes deliberately comic, inviting the reader to side with the Buddha against the folly) — followed by the Buddha's rebuke and the rule itself. A striking example: rebuking a monk who had sex with his former wife, the Buddha frames the whole issue in terms of passion and dispassion — "Haven't I taught the Dhamma… for dispassion and not for passion; for unfettering and not for fettering?" He then states ten aims behind formulating any rule (Pr 1), falling into three categories: the wellbeing of the monastic Community, the protection of lay people's faith and support, and — the internal aim — restraining each individual monk's effluents. Understanding these reasons lets a monk borrow the Buddha's discernment as his own, and shows compassion for himself, his fellow monks, and the wider Community.

19. Rules & Determinations

Vinaya training builds all four determinations. For discernment, beyond learning to talk yourself into or out of an action for long-term benefit, the Vinaya's method for judging edge cases — analyzing an act by object, perception, intention, effort, and result (e.g., killing a human requires all five conditions to be met for the harshest penalty; partial matches, like mistaking a person for a rock in the dark, draw lesser or no penalty) — trains you to notice intention and perception, the two pre-sensory factors of dependent co-arising, in your own actions generally.

Clear-cut rules with clearly defined exceptions force precision in judging your own behavior, fostering truth. The need to abandon rule-breaking behavior — including the mental habit of excuse-making — fosters relinquishment. And a clean conscience, free of remorse, is itself a source of joy that calms the mind, fostering the fourth determination.

20. Training Rules for All

For lay people, the Buddha recommended five training rules, also found in the monastic Vinaya: refrain from killing living beings, taking what isn't given, sexual misconduct, deliberate lying, and intoxicants that cause heedlessness. "Living being" covers animals visible to the naked eye; "stealing" is taking what you know belongs to another without their approval (borrowing with intent to return doesn't count); "sexual misconduct" for lay people covers intercourse with minors, the married, the celibate, or those committed to someone else (MN 41); "deliberate lying" is any knowing misrepresentation regardless of motive, and the Buddha called it the most serious of the five, since a lie's damage to a listener's understanding can outlast a single lifetime; "intoxicants" covers substances that impair mindfulness and heedfulness specifically (not, e.g., caffeine).

Training under these rules means not breaking them, not inducing others to break them, and not condoning others' breaking them (Sn 2:14) — benefiting yourself directly and others indirectly (AN 4:99). Universal adherence is described as extending safety to all beings and receiving a share of that safety in return (AN 8:39) — "the treasure of virtue" (AN 7:6). Just as with monastics, the

reward for lay practitioners is the same: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency that support concentration, and a clean conscience that produces the calming joy needed for deeper practice.

21. Virtue as Attitudes (1)

Beyond formal rules, virtue is also cultivated as attitudes and character qualities. The most foundational is conviction — specifically, conviction that the Buddha was truly awakened, taught rightly, and that his noble disciples have practiced rightly and gained a glimpse of that awakening too (AN 10:92) — which reduces to conviction that the Buddha's awakening was genuine. That awakening consisted of three knowledges: (1) rebirth is a fact, driven by craving and clinging at death; (2) the kind of becoming you take is determined by your actions — skillful intentions lead to pleasant becoming, unskillful ones to painful becoming, though even pleasant becoming, being caused, eventually ends; (3) further becoming can be stopped by ending craving and clinging (MN 19) — which is precisely how the Buddha himself became unbound.

Since these claims can't be empirically proven to someone who hasn't glimpsed awakening, the Buddha offered a pragmatic argument to skeptics: acting as if rebirth and kamma were true tends toward more skillful behavior regardless of whether they turn out to be true. If true, you've made yourself safe; if not, you're still spared hostility and ill will (AN 3:66), and your conduct still earns the praise of the wise (MN 60). This argument only lands with people willing to step back from immediate desires and reflect honestly — which is exactly who the Buddha aimed to teach: he's called "the unexcelled leader of those fit to be tamed," not

the teacher of absolutely everyone. Conviction, foundational to both admirable friendship (needing a sense of shame toward the wise) and appropriate attention (needing honest self-reflection), is accordingly often listed first among virtuous attitudes — "the foundation post of the fortress of practice" (AN 7:63).

22. Virtue as Attitudes (2)

A second cluster of qualities — scrupulousness, restraint of the senses, moderation in eating, and wakefulness (AN 4:37) — guards against regression and brings practitioners near unbinding. Scrupulousness means seeing danger in the slightest fault, illustrated by a story of a monk gently corrected by a forest spirit for merely sniffing a lotus flower without permission — even so small an act, the spirit says, looms large to "one unblemished, constantly searching for purity" (SN 9:14).

Restraint of the senses means not dwelling on features of a sense-impression that would provoke greed or distress (AN 4:37) — not blocking the senses, but treating engagement with them as an active process you can examine and redirect, using mindfulness as a dam and discernment to address what feeds the stream (Sn 5:1). A vivid parable warns against underestimating a small indulgence: a tree-spirit's friends dismiss a fallen creeper seed as harmless, only for the creeper to grow, envelop the tree, and eventually bring its limbs crashing down — just as those who claim "there's no harm in sensual pleasures" meet their downfall through them (MN 45). To help "talk to yourself" more skillfully about sense pleasure, the Buddha offers a stock of images: sensuality as a dog gnawing a fleshless bone, as a pit of burning embers, as flesh fought over by

hawks. He also praises restraint as strength rather than weakness, comparing a well-trained monk to a battle-elephant unshaken by sights, sounds, smells, hunger, or wounds (AN 5:139), and compares mindfulness of the body to a strong post to which six wild, pulling animals (representing the six senses) are tethered until they tire and settle (SN 35:206).

Moderation in eating means eating "not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for bulk, nor for beauty," but simply to sustain the body and support practice, ending old hunger without creating new discomfort from overeating (AN 4:37). A stark parable makes the point: a starving couple crossing a desert who must eat the flesh of their own dead child to survive clearly aren't eating for pleasure — food, the Buddha says, should be regarded with exactly that grim, purely functional attitude; fully comprehending food in this way comprehends passion for sensuality itself, and leads to the penultimate stage of awakening, non-return (SN 12:63).

Wakefulness means both minimal sleep and vigilance while awake — cleansing the mind of restrictive qualities through the day and much of the night, sleeping mindfully on the right side with the intention to rise, as a foundation for the mindfulness and concentration to come.

23. Virtue as Attitudes (3)

A third cluster (AN 8:30, alongside qualities discussed later under concentration and discernment) rounds out virtue's attitudinal side: being reclusive rather than entangled, modest rather than self-aggrandizing, and content rather than discontent. These three reinforce each other — solitude reduces material needs,

easing contentment and modesty, while contentment and modesty in turn make solitude sustainable — and together express relinquishment and calm, preparing the mind for concentration.

Not every disciple is ready for solitude straightaway; new monks train under a mentor for at least five years, since attempting deep seclusion without prior concentration is like a rabbit imitating a bull elephant's swim across a deep lake — the elephant finds footing where the rabbit sinks or is swept away (AN 10:99). Options short of full forest seclusion — dwelling alone in an empty building, or taking temporary stints in the forest under a mentor's guidance — bridge the gap.

Contentment means accepting whatever robe cloth, almsfood, lodging, or medicine one receives (AN 8:30) — the traditional four supports of monastic life are famously bare: cast-off cloth, a tree's roots for shelter, fermented urine as medicine. But the Buddha was alert to a subtler danger: pride in one's own austerity. So contentment must be paired with equanimity — not agitated when gains are absent, not attached when gains appear (Sn 4:10, 4:14) — and with endurance of discomfort (cold, heat, hunger, insects — Sn 4:16). Contentment, notably, applies only to material things, never to one's level of skill: the Buddha attributed his own awakening to relentless *discontent* with his spiritual attainments short of full release (AN 2:5) — contentment establishes priorities among desires rather than extinguishing them.

Modesty means not wanting your good qualities known — not advertising your virtue, contentment, concentration, or discernment (AN 8:30) — both because

boasting is described as ignoble (Sn 4:3) and because it protects seclusion from the vanity that fuels needless debate (Sn 4:8): “great rivers flow silent; whatever’s deficient makes noise” (Sn 3:11).

Reclusiveness doesn’t mean total avoidance of people — monks still go for alms and answer questions — but it means not cultivating relationships for their own sake, and conversing only as much as necessary before returning to seclusion (AN 8:30). The Canon is blunt about why: attachment to people is a major source of suffering. When the Buddha reminded the grieving Lady Visākhā that wishing for countless grandchildren would mean countless future funerals, he summarized: “sorrows… exist dependent on something dear… blissful and sorrowless are those for whom nothing… is anywhere dear” (Ud 8:8) — a stance balanced elsewhere by the instruction to cultivate goodwill toward all beings rather than narrow attachment to a few.

Fear is another challenge of solitude. The Buddha describes deliberately staying in awe-inspiring, “hair-raising” places before his own awakening, refusing to change posture (walking, standing, sitting, lying) until he had subdued whatever fear arose in that posture (MN 4) — training courage directly rather than avoiding its triggers. The reward for solitude is full-time capacity to train the mind, as praised throughout the Rhinoceros Sutta (“wander alone like a rhinoceros” — Sn 1:3), and is likened to a wild bull elephant who, tired of being crowded and jostled by the herd, withdraws alone and finally finds unbroken grass, clean water, and relief — an image the Buddha applies directly to a monk leaving the crowd for the seclusion in which the four levels of jhāna become possible (AN 9:40).

24. Herding Your Thoughts (1)

The training in heightened mind — concentration — begins where the Buddha's own account (MN 19) begins: sorting thoughts not by whether they're pleasant, but by their consequences. Thoughts of sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness lead to affliction and block discernment; thoughts of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness afflict no one and promote discernment. Like a cowherd who must actively drive cattle from the rice fields during growing season but can relax his vigilance once the crop is harvested, the Buddha "abandoned, destroyed, dispelled" unskillful thoughts while simply staying mindful of skillful ones — refining his standard further still, since even excessive skillful thinking tires the body and disturbs the mind, so he eventually steadied the mind and entered concentration itself.

This shows commitment-and-reflection maturing directly into concentration practice, and confirms concentration as a continuation of the same inner battle begun in virtue — hence the Canon's abundant martial imagery, now supplemented with craft-metaphors (cooks, archers in training) signaling increasing refinement. Since entering the first jhāna requires the five hindrances first cleared away, right effort (persistence aimed at abandoning unskillful qualities and cultivating skillful ones — AN 8:30) and right mindfulness do this preparatory work.

Right effort draws on desire in two ways. First, implicitly: causes of suffering divide into those you can simply out-stare into dissolving through equanimity, and those that "stare back," requiring active strategic use of bodily, verbal, and

mental fabrication to dislodge (MN 101) — essentially, all the Buddha's specific meditation instructions are guidelines for skillful fabrication of these three kinds. Second, explicitly: right effort's standard definition (SN 45:8) calls for actively generating desire to prevent, abandon, arise, and develop qualities as needed. The Canon offers ready-made motivational fabrications — persistence compared to soldiers defending a fortress (AN 7:63), or to someone searching for heartwood who refuses to settle for easier leaves or bark (MN 29) — and verbal formulas built around heedfulness: reflecting that youth, health, abundance, social peace, and communal harmony are all temporary conditions that make practice easier now than it may be later, so the time to make effort is now (AN 5:77–78).

Strikingly, the Canon also recommends using craving and conceit themselves, strategically, against their own unskillful forms — hearing of another's attainment and thinking "I hope I too can reach that" relies on craving to abandon craving; thinking "why not me?" relies on conceit to abandon conceit (AN 4:159). Likewise, "renunciation-based distress" — the ache of longing for liberation, felt on seeing the impermanence of sense-pleasures — is deliberately cultivated to overcome the ordinary distress of failing to get what you want (MN 137). Only at the path's most advanced stages does the desire for awakening itself need to be set aside; until then, it's essential fuel.

25. Herding Your Thoughts (2)

The Buddha gives five escalating techniques (MN 20) for removing distracting thoughts during concentration practice, each with its own illustrative image: (1)

switch attention to a different, skillful theme — like a carpenter knocking out a coarse peg with a finer one; (2) if that fails, scrutinize the drawbacks of the distracting thoughts — as one recoils from a rotting carcass hung around the neck; (3) deliberately pay them no mind — as one simply looks away from an unwanted sight; (4) attend to gradually relaxing the thought-fabrication behind them — like someone who notices they're walking quickly and consciously slows, then stands, then sits, then lies down, always taking up a more refined posture; and (5), as a last resort, forcibly restrain the mind with clenched teeth and tongue pressed to the roof of the mouth — as a strong man physically overpowers a weaker one. Each technique, applied as needed, allows the mind to settle, unify, and enter concentration.

26. Training in Mindfulness

Right mindfulness — defined as an active-memory faculty (AN 8:30) — builds on right effort in two ways: generally, by keeping the object of concentration in mind and continually clearing distractions; and specifically, through its full formula (SN 45:8), which centers on two tasks: staying focused on a single object (like the body, taken just in and of itself) and subduing greed and distress toward the outside world, aided by ardency (= right effort), alertness (observing what you're doing as you do it), and mindfulness itself (memory of what needs doing, and what's been learned). Applied to body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, these are the "four establishings of mindfulness."

Contrary to a popular misconception, mindfulness isn't neutral, non-judgmental openness to whatever arises. Its own canonical definition as "governing

principle" (AN 4:245) is explicitly agenda-driven: to complete unfinished training, protect completed training, scrutinize what hasn't yet been examined, and touch through release what hasn't yet been realized. A vivid parable makes the same point: a quail that strays from its "proper range" (a stony field) into a hawk's open territory gets caught, while a quail that stays within its proper range escapes even a diving hawk, whose breast shatters against the stone it hides behind. Likewise, a monk's "proper range" is the four establishings of mindfulness; wandering into the "territory of others" — the five strings of sensuality — gives an opening to Māra (SN 47:6). Mindfulness also actively tracks what works, the way a skilled cook notes which dishes please his master and adjusts accordingly (SN 47:8) — not passive acceptance, but ongoing, judgment-guided refinement toward calm and concentration.

27. Training in Concentration

Concentration is the mind gathered to a single point (cittass'ek'aggatā), most often around one of the four establishings of mindfulness, or one of the four sublime attitudes (goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity — AN 8:70). The standard formula describes four levels of jhāna, distinguished by the mind's relationship to its object and by feeling-tone:

- **First jhāna**: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion from sensuality and unskillful qualities, still accompanied by directed thought and evaluation — actively thinking about and refining one's grip on the object, comparable to the earlier cook simile, and identified (MN 78) as the highest level of skillful resolve.

- **Second jhāna**: directed thought and evaluation still, giving way to a simpler, unified "internal assurance" — rapture and pleasure now born of concentration itself, with even skillful resolve having ceased.
- **Third jhāna**: rapture fades; equanimity and mindfulness remain, with pleasure still felt in the body.
- **Fourth jhāna**: pleasure itself fades; only pure equanimity and mindfulness remain, "neither pleasure nor pain" — with breathing itself said to stop being sensed (SN 36:11).

The Buddha's similes for the four jhānas (DN 2) show that jhāna is a state of full-body absorption, not narrow one-pointed focus: a bathman kneading water into bath powder until the whole ball is saturated but not dripping (first jhāna — pleasure worked in by conscious effort, the mind not fully immersed); a lake fed by its own internal spring, no part unpervaded by cool water (second jhāna — pleasure now effortless, the mind fully immersed); lotuses growing and flourishing fully submerged (third jhāna — pleasure without rapture, at peace); and a man sitting wrapped head-to-foot in white cloth (fourth jhāna — pure, bright awareness, without agitation). The bathman's conscious kneading — unlike the passive spring — represents directed thought and evaluation doing necessary preparatory work in the first jhāna: not mere instability but the active labor (equivalent to noble right resolve, MN 117) that makes the deeper immersion of later jhānas possible.

28. Other Maps of Concentration

Beyond the four jhānas, the Canon describes five "formless" attainments — infinitude of space, infinitude of consciousness, nothingness, neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and cessation of perception and feeling (AN 9:32) — which, since discernment leading to awakening can be gained from any of them, also count as right concentration. MN 140 frames them as applications of fourth-jhāna equanimity to increasingly refined objects: the first two shift the *object* while the mind's relation to it (unified equanimity) stays constant; the third replaces unity itself with a perception of nothingness; the fourth attenuates perception until it's neither present nor absent; the fifth ends all mental fabrication.

Several routes lead to these formless states: the standard four jhānas; a five-jhāna variant with an intermediate stage between the first and second (AN 8:70); and two further maps, for meditators whose experience centers on inner light and form rather than bodily sensation — one involving the perception of light, then beauty (SN 14:11); the other involving stages of perceiving forms internally, then externally, then focusing purely on beauty (DN 15). The Buddha's own account of refining his perception of light and forms (MN 128) lists obstacles he had to work through — doubt, inattention, sloth, panic, excitement, boredom, excess or slack persistence, distraction by multiplicity, and over-absorption in form — before settling into balanced calm and proceeding through the standard jhāna sequence to full awakening. This suggests that light/form-based concentration can be a useful entry point for visually-inclined meditators, but that the jhānas proper — with their direct engagement of bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication — remain the ideal foundation for liberating insight,

especially through the practice the Buddha taught most and used on the night of his own awakening: mindfulness of in-and-out breathing.

29. More than Just Calm

When Ven. Ariṭṭha claimed to already practice breath meditation — describing it as breathing mindfully after abandoning sensual desire and subduing perceptions of resistance — the Buddha didn't deny this was a form of breath meditation, but said it wouldn't bear full results, and offered instead his own sixteen-step formula (MN 118). Ariṭṭha's method promotes calm through blanket equanimity but doesn't dig into the ignorant desires that can hide beneath that calm; it addresses only the causes of suffering that dissolve under equanimity, not those that "stare back" and require active fabrication to dislodge. Lacking insight into fabrication, it offers no way to actively build the jhānas, nor to later deconstruct them for full release.

The Buddha's sixteen steps, by contrast, are organized into four tetrads corresponding to the four establishings of mindfulness — body, feelings, mind, mental qualities — of which the first three are pursued in parallel (switching between them to solve whatever obstacle is currently interfering with unifying body-sensation, pleasant feeling, and awareness) while the fourth is used to strip away worldly distractions by contemplating their impermanence. The instructions are notably proactive rather than passive: discern long and short breath, then actively train to breathe sensitive to and calming the whole body (tetrad 1); sensitive to and calming rapture, pleasure, and mental fabrication (tetrad 2); sensitive to, gladdening, concentrating, and releasing the mind (tetrad

3); and focusing on inconstancy, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment (tetrad 4).

By making the meditator sensitive to bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication — and by teaching how to generate and calm each at will — the sixteen steps build insight and calm together, giving direct practice in exactly the kind of fabrication needed to counter the stubborn causes of suffering. Because they train skill in the fabrications themselves, rather than just the breath (which must eventually fall away, even at death), these skills persist and can guide a dying mind through whatever craving and clinging arise when the body can no longer sustain itself. And by making fabrication itself the object of attention, the method builds in an implicit warning: the states of concentration it produces are themselves fabricated, and — like everything fabricated — will eventually need to be let go.

30. Discernment in Concentration

Right concentration also trains discernment, defined as knowledge of "arising and passing away — noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress" (AN 8:30). Discernment begins by recognizing fabrication's defining mark — arising and passing away — but, like mindfulness, isn't mere bare observation: it must also judge fabrication's *value*, ultimately concluding that however useful fabrications are for building the path, none are worth clinging to once the path is complete. "Noble" ties this to the search for the deathless (MN 26) — you observe arising and passing away not to affirm it but to end it. "Penetrating" means fully knowing something's nature, cause, range of skillful/unskillful forms, results, cessation, and the path to its cessation (AN 6:63) — applied to

fabrication: it is intention; its cause is contact; its results are pleasure and pain; its cessation is the cessation of the six senses; its path is the eightfold path. This requires actively manipulating causes, not passively watching them — exactly what the proactive method of breath meditation trains. "Leading to the right ending of stress" means this penetrating knowledge must actually be put into practice via the path, fostering dispassion for craving, the cause of stress.

31. Mindfulness, Concentration, & Discernment at the Breath

The Buddha calls his sixteen-step breath meditation both a mindfulness and a concentration practice (SN 54:8), and it maps onto both formulas at once. The first three tetrads (body, feelings, mind) all stay anchored to the breath — in the Buddha's classification, part of the body's wind-property, sensed from within, not the tactile sensation of air at the nostrils (MN 28) — so paying close attention to the breath simultaneously reveals feelings and mind-states arising right there, fulfilling right mindfulness's first duty (tracking body, feelings, mind together) while giving the mind a single gathering place, the essence of concentration. The fourth tetrad fulfills mindfulness's second duty — subduing greed and distress toward the world — but goes further than mere pacification, using discernment about inconstancy to actually relinquish distracting desire, engaging all four determinations simultaneously.

Mapped onto the jhānas: the first tetrad tracks the breath growing progressively calmer through the four jhānas until, in the fourth, in-and-out breathing itself is no longer sensed. The second tetrad tracks rapture (present in the first two jhānas), pleasure (present through the third), and the increasingly refined

perception and feeling that persist all the way through the formless attainments, until both cease entirely in the ninth attainment (cessation of perception and feeling). Though verbal fabrication drops out after the second jhāna and the breath after the fourth, the mind still makes deliberate choices when shifting between higher attainments — analogous to a standing person watching someone sit, or a sitting person watching someone lie down (AN 5:28) — moments when fabrication briefly resumes and any of the sixteen steps could still apply.

The third tetrad — sensitizing, gladdening, concentrating, and releasing the mind — spans the whole training: gladdening starts with generosity and virtue, refines through the rapture and pleasure of the first three jhānas, and culminates in the joy of full attainment; concentrating grows steadier through the jhānas, becoming fully "imperturbable" from the fourth jhāna onward; releasing progressively frees the mind from one level of affliction after another, becoming total only at unbinding.

The fourth tetrad — inconstancy, dispassion, cessation, relinquishment — details how this release actually happens: applied early on to whatever distracts from the meditation object, and later, once concentration is mastered, applied to the concentration states themselves — seeing even the most refined fabricated states as impermanent, developing dispassion for fabrication as such, until all fabrication (even attachment to the deathless itself) ceases and total unbinding occurs (AN 9:36).

32. Leaping Up

Liberating discernment based on jhāna practice can proceed in two ways: watching the mind move from one jhāna level to the next, or examining a single jhāna from within. Either way, discernment does two jobs — first seeing that a given state of concentration is fabricated (intentionally constructed), then arriving at the value judgment that, however refined, it isn't worth the effort of maintaining it.

In the "moving between levels" method, one text (SN 36:11) tracks how each higher jhāna calms away another layer of fabrication — speech at the first jhāna, verbal fabrication (directed thought and evaluation) at the second, rapture at the third, breathing itself at the fourth, and finally perception and feeling at the cessation attainment — like ore being heated until lead, then zinc, then silver, then gold successively melt and separate out. But merely observing this isn't enough; genuine dispassion requires actively contemplating drawbacks and rewards at each stage. The Buddha describes doing exactly this in his own practice (AN 9:41): before awakening, he found his heart wouldn't "leap up" toward renunciation until he deliberately reflected on the drawbacks of sensuality and the rewards of renunciation — only then did his heart incline toward the first jhāna. He repeated this pattern at every subsequent stage, noticing what perception now felt like an affliction (directed thought at the second jhāna, rapture at the third, equanimity at the fourth, and so on through the formless attainments) and using contemplation to move past it, until — after seeing the drawbacks even of neither-perception-nor-non-perception — he reached the cessation of perception and feeling and total release. At every step,

this used one determined desire (for deeper calm) to overcome competing desires (attachment to the current level) — desire deployed strategically against itself.

33. The Skilled Archer

The second method — examining a jhāna from within, rather than moving between levels — uses the image of an archer perfecting his skill through practice (AN 9:36) rather than a battle: having secured mastery of a jhāna, the meditator regards its constituent phenomena (form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness) as inconstant, stressful, "a disease, a cancer, an arrow… not-self," then turns the mind away from them toward the deathless as peace. This works because any jhāna, examined closely, reveals itself as built from the five aggregates — in first-jhāna breath meditation, for instance, form is the breath itself, feeling is the pleasure of sustained attention to it, perception is the awareness of that pleasure pervading the body, fabrication is the intention plus directed thought and evaluation sustaining it, and consciousness registers all of it. Eleven canonical perceptions — falling under the three headings of inconstancy, stress, and not-self — are offered as tools to cultivate dispassion toward whatever level of fabrication the meditator has mastered.

This liberating appreciation of the unfabricated matches the eighth and final quality that makes one "worthy of the Dhamma": delighting in non-objectification (AN 8:30). "Objectification" (papañca) is the Buddha's term for the thought process beginning with "I am the thinker," which cascades into a full sense of self as a being who must feed — and inevitably collides with other similarly self-

objectifying beings (recall Chapter 9's account of conflict). Non-objectification uproots that original perception, freeing the mind from conflict altogether.

One subtlety: it's possible, on first glimpsing the deathless this way, to develop passion both for the deathless itself and for the very perceptions of discernment that led there — a blind spot that blocks full awakening. This is why the Buddha recommends applying the perception "not-self" even to the unfabricated (MN 35) — and, ultimately, dropping that very perception too, once it has done its work, since a perception that's fully and thoroughly examined contains within it the seeds of its own transcendence.

34. Allure & Drawbacks

Two further canonical formulas fill out the reflections that dissolve desire and passion. The first is a five-step contemplation applied to the senses, physical properties, and the cosmos as a whole (and a seven-step variant for the aggregates): find the origination of a given fabrication, its passing away, its allure, its drawbacks, and the escape from it — i.e., the subduing of desire and passion (SN 14:31, SN 22:57). Two texts (SN 22:5, 22:26) apply the plain five-step version to the aggregates too, and are unusually detailed. Origination and passing away here are sometimes framed simply as "enjoying, welcoming, and staying fastened" to something versus not — consistent with the principle that all phenomena are rooted in desire.

The crucial, often-overlooked step is *allure* — genuinely locating what you find attractive about a given craving. Until the allure is clearly identified, drawbacks can be contemplated indefinitely without loosening the grip. DN 22 lists all the

possible locations where craving settles — in the sense object itself, in perception of it, in intention toward it, in thinking about it, in evaluating it, even in the craving itself (as with people "in love with the idea of being in love"). Honest determination on truth is essential here, since conflicted emotion tends to obscure exactly where the allure lies. Once allure and drawback are both seen clearly and honestly compared, an honest value judgment becomes possible: the allure has been overpromising and underdelivering, and it loses its grip.

A second guide (SN 22:59) fleshes out the three perceptions already met — inconstancy, stress, not-self — showing their logical chain: what's inconstant is inherently stressful (since any happiness built on it is unreliable), and what's stressful doesn't qualify as "me" or "mine." This directly answers discernment's basic question — "what leads to long-term well-being?" — since the inconstant fails the "long-term" test and the stressful fails the "well-being" test. But applying this only to present fabrications leaves room for the mind to imagine future satisfaction elsewhere; so the Buddha extends the reflection to *all* aggregates — "past, future, or present, internal or external… far or near" — closing off every position in time and space, leaving only the possibility of abandoning the very parameters of time and space. That is total escape.

35. Relinquishing the Path

The subduing of desire and passion has to be thorough — like the Buddha's mirror-instruction to Rāhula, checking for even the slightest blemish (MN 61) — and this thoroughness applies not just to concentration but to every factor of the path, including effort and view themselves. Applying the five-step formula to the

five faculties (conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment — an expanded version of the triple training) leads, per SN 48:3–4, first to stream-entry and ultimately to full awakening.

Right effort itself must eventually be released. When a devatā asked how the Buddha crossed the flood of becoming, he answered: "without pushing forward, without staying in place" — pushing forward, he was swept along; staying still, he sank (SN 1:1). Right effort depends on a working sense of "here" (where the mind currently is) and "there" (where you want it to go) — useful for directing training, but ultimately itself a form of location-making rooted in craving. Once the path is fully developed, this very "here and there" is seen as a disturbance; abandoning it entirely — with nowhere to push toward and nowhere to stay — removes the last fabrication, even the fabrication of intending not to fabricate, leaving the mind free of the worlds of becoming (Ud 8:1, 8:4).

Right view, too, contains the seeds of its own transcendence, since it grants insight into the fact and value of fabrication generally — including view itself. A striking dialogue has the layman Anāthapiṇḍika meet a group of wanderers debating classic metaphysical questions (is the cosmos eternal? finite? is the soul the body or separate?). He dismantles each position by pointing out that any view "has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently co-arisen" and therefore inconstant, therefore stressful — and that clinging to any such view means submitting to that very stress. When pressed for his own view, he states his in the same fully self-aware form: "whatever is fabricated is inconstant… is not me, is not what I am, is not my self" — and adds that he also discerns "the higher escape from it," leaving the wanderers speechless (AN

10:93). Right view is "right" precisely because, followed all the way through, it directs you to see its own fabricated nature and let it go too — the final step in an all-around release.

36. Levels of Awakening

All awakening experiences share a common core: contact with the unfabricated, the deathless, outside space and time, reached by bringing all four determinations to bear on committed reflection using the five-step formula applied to the five faculties (SN 48:3–4). What differs across meditators is the quality of reflection *on* that experience — if you fail to notice lingering passion for the deathless itself, awakening remains partial (AN 9:36), like a person who sees water in a well but hasn't jumped in, versus one who has actually plunged (SN 12:68).

The Canon lists four levels of awakening, distinguished by which of ten fetters have been cut, and by remaining rebirths:

- **Stream-enterer**: cuts self-identification views (any of the four ways of identifying self with the aggregates — SN 22:1), doubt (in the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha), and grasping at habits and practices (either thinking rules alone bring awakening, or building identity around one's own practices — MN 78). Fully accomplished in virtue, only moderately so in concentration and discernment (AN 3:87); guaranteed no more than seven further rebirths, none below the human realm.
- **Once-returner**: cuts the same three fetters plus attenuates passion, aversion, and delusion; returns to this world at most once more.

- **Non-returner**: additionally cuts sensual desire and ill will (linked, since ill will arises from thwarted sensuality); fully accomplished in virtue and concentration, moderately so in discernment (AN 3:87); reborn only in the Pure Abodes, never returning to this world.
- **Arahant**: cuts the five remaining, subtler "higher fetters" — passion for form (jhāna pleasures), passion for formlessness (formless-attainment equanimity), conceit (the lingering sense of "I am," illustrated by a cloth still faintly scented by the soap that cleaned it — SN 22:89), restlessness, and ignorance (understood as remaining lack of skill). A vivid exchange shows how subtle these are: Ven. Anuruddha reports impressive meditative powers yet finds his mind still unreleased; Ven. Sāriputta diagnoses conceit in his pride at the powers, restlessness in his self-monitoring, and anxiety in his very concern about non-release — urging him to drop all three and turn straight to the deathless (AN 3:131).

Because becoming operates on three levels — sensuality, form, formlessness — and passion for each is cut respectively at non-return, and (for form and formlessness both) at arahantship, arahants have exhausted every possible avenue back into becoming: there is no more rebirth for them. Such people are called "beyond training" (asekha) — the Buddha has nothing further to teach them, and they no longer need conviction in his teaching, since they've verified it directly for themselves (illustrated in an exchange where Ven. Sāriputta tells the Buddha plainly that he doesn't take the efficacy of the five faculties on conviction but has "known, seen, penetrated, realized" it himself — SN 48:44).

Arahants continue to experience the six senses (working out old kamma) but are "disjoined" from them — a state illustrated by the simile of a butcher who has fully separated a cow's hide from its flesh: however he might drape the skin back over the carcass, the two remain genuinely disconnected (MN 146). Their intentional actions, being free of greed, aversion, and delusion, bear no further kammic fruit — like seeds burned to ash and scattered to the wind, incapable of ever sprouting again (AN 3:34). At death, an arahant experiences simply "all this will grow cold" (the six senses), while the unfabricated consciousness of awakening — never dependent on those senses — is unaffected; such a person cannot, in life or after death, be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither — undefined and immeasurable, "like the great ocean" (MN 72).

37. To Summarize

Sāriputta's opening formula implicitly asserted five things: (1) the mind actively shapes experience rather than merely receiving it; (2) it has real power of choice and can change direction quickly; (3) the Buddha's teaching is fundamentally how-to, not merely descriptive; (4) that how-to rests on judging actions by their long-term results; (5) the Buddha had to strategically arouse desire for the very goal of ending desire. Brief answers to the five questions these assertions raise:

How does the mind create suffering, and how can it stop? Suffering isn't received passively — it's the act of feeding, via desire and passion, on the aggregates, wanting from them a happiness they can't fully deliver. The fault lies not in the aggregates but in the desire and passion for them; through the three fabrications (bodily, verbal, mental), the mind actively cooks up the very

aggregates it then feeds on, from raw materials supplied by past kamma. Since fabrication aims at results, it presupposes the mind can choose and can observe its own results — but ignorance (lack of knowledge, or lack of skill) distorts this feedback loop, whether through willful blindness to harm caused, or through a limited imagination of what's possible. The deepest ignorance is simply not knowing that a path to deathless happiness exists at all — the corrective is conviction, as working hypothesis, followed by disciplined exercise of choice, observation, and judgment.

How can the mind change direction skillfully? Not through wishing desire away, but through training — pitting an overarching desire for awakening (expressed as the four determinations: discernment, truth, relinquishment, calm) against specific contrary desires, using pragmatic, strategic discernment rather than abstract principle alone.

What training does the Buddha propose, and how does that shape what/how/why/whom he taught? A training developing both the powers of committed choice and honest reflection, moving from externally guided training (requiring honesty and conviction toward a teacher) to self-training (requiring a healthy threefold sense of self as agent, beneficiary, and inner critic — eventually to be set aside once it's done its work). The triple training's three parts reinforce each other through repeated commitment and reflection. As for *how* he taught: not just informing but urging, rousing, and encouraging, using skillful fabrications (similes, self-talk formulas, breathing instructions) as living examples of the very skills he was teaching. As for *why*: pure compassion for people already bewildered by self-caused suffering and searching for a way out

(AN 6:63), asking nothing in return but practice. As for *whom*: those honest and observant enough to build conviction into genuine training — or willing to become so.

What grounds the Buddha's claims about kamma, rebirth, and objective truth? He never claimed the truth of rebirth could be proven to anyone who hadn't verified it directly; instead he offered it as a useful working hypothesis that, even if false, would still produce a life free of hostility and worthy of the wise's praise. Full objectivity comes only from stepping fully outside the space-and-time-bound conditions (perception, intention, attention) that ordinarily color all knowledge.

Was the Buddha inconsistent in using desire to end desire? No — strategic. Throughout the path, skillful clinging, determination, and desire are deliberately employed and then relinquished once they've done their work, as one aspect of the Buddha's broader strategy of using fabrications to lead beyond fabrication. Crucially, he wasn't asking listeners to lower their sights and settle for smaller pleasures — he was asking them to raise their sights, replacing desires that lead to suffering with desire for something genuinely beyond anything fabrication can produce: a happiness so complete it needs no further desire ever again.

38. The Gist

Before his ordination, Sāriputta — then a wandering ascetic — was struck by the serene bearing of Ven. Assaji, one of the Buddha's first five awakened disciples, and asked him for the gist of his teacher's Dhamma. Assaji, modestly claiming to be new to the teaching, offered a single verse: "Whatever phenomena arise from

a cause: their cause and their cessation — such is the teaching of the Tathāgata" (Mv I.23.5). Hearing it, Sāriputta immediately gained the Dhamma eye — a striking display of the discernment for which the Buddha would later praise him as foremost among his students, and foremost also at leading others to the same insight (MN 141).

It's tempting to wonder whether Sāriputta's later choice to introduce the Dhamma via "the subduing of desire and passion" reflects an intuitive link back to that founding insight — did he recognize desire and passion as the "cause" Assaji pointed to? We can't know for certain, but three practical reasons likely also shaped his choice: the phrase was immediately accessible (used elsewhere to define other technical terms, never itself needing definition — even used with laypeople entirely new to the teaching, SN 42:11); it was rousing, warning listeners honestly that the task ahead would be demanding; and it was comprehensive, since desire and passion turn out to be the connecting thread running through all four noble truths — suffering as desire feeding on the aggregates, its cause as desire and passion thirsting for sensuality, becoming, or non-becoming, its cessation as their subduing, and its path (mindfulness, jhāna, and the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self) as aimed precisely at abandoning them. In focusing on this single thread, Sāriputta gave his listeners — and gives us — the gist and the goal of the entire teaching: total freedom, and nothing less.

(The original book closes with an Appendix giving the full canonical text of Ven. Sāriputta's Answer, SN 22:2 — the discourse this whole book unpacks — followed by a Glossary of Pali terms and Abbreviations. Readers seeking the complete

discourse and reference apparatus should consult the full edition, freely available from Metta Forest Monastery and dhammatalks.org.)